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Better Place Australia practitioners' understanding of coercive control

June 2025

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Executive summary

Better Place Australia practitioners participated in an online survey about coercive control in practice. The survey focused on perceptions relating to gender differences in the use and experience of coercion.

Perceived gender differences

There were a range of perceived gender differences observed:

- Female clients more commonly self-identify as victim/survivors of coercive control than male clients, with half of practitioners suggesting female clients self-identify 'most of the time'.
- There was a perceived difference in the types of negative comments men and women make about their partner.
- Female clients were perceived to be more severely impacted by persistent negative comments made by their partner compared to male clients.
- Practitioners generally understood that one gender coerces other adults more frequently than the other; opinions were mixed as to whether the impact of coercion was the same regardless of if it was done by a man or woman.
- Opinions were mixed as to whether men and women coerce their children with the same frequency, but there was general agreement that the impact is the same regardless of if it is done by the male or female parent.

The findings suggest that coercive control is generally viewed through a gendered lens, and that female clients commonly identify as victim/survivors. The report highlights opportunities to deepen understanding of non-verbal forms of coercion, including systems abuse, and the use of victim narratives by perpetrators. These insights will support Better Place Australia's continued efforts to align with national principles and strengthen trauma-informed practice across services.



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A note on terminology

Throughout this report, we refer to male and female clients. We acknowledge that both gender and sexual orientation exist on a spectrum beyond the male/female binary. The surveys that generated the data presented in this report focused on relationships between men and women as this represents the majority of our current service users. In the future, we are committed to exploring ways to collect data that reflects the experiences of gender-diverse and non-heterosexual service users, in a manner that is inclusive, respectful, and safeguards privacy and anonymity.

Furthermore, the survey also asked about “current or former partners”, reflecting the nature of many of Better Place Australia’s services. For brevity and readability, we use the term “partner” throughout this report to refer to both current and former partners.



Background

Coercive control is increasingly recognised in Australia as a core feature of family and domestic violence. It refers to a pattern of abusive behaviours – physical, non-physical or both – used by perpetrators to dominate or control victim-survivors, creating fear and limiting their freedom, and often underpins family and domestic violence.¹ These behaviours often occur over time and may not be immediately visible but their impact can be profound. Coercive control is recognised as a risk factor in family violence homicides² and is now a central consideration in prevention and intervention efforts.

The *National Principles to Address Coercive Control and Domestic Violence* ('National Principles'), developed by the Australian Government in partnership with states and territories, provide a shared understanding to guide both government and non-government organisations.¹ Despite there being a national framework, there are disconnected approaches to recognising and responding to coercive control as this left to individual states and territories. Within Victoria, coercive control is embedded in the MARAM Framework (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management), which is used across the family services sector. MARAM identifies coercive control as central to understanding and responding to family violence risk. MARAM was introduced across most Better Place Australia services throughout 2023 and 2024, with some being MARAM-prescribed and others using the framework voluntarily.

To support ongoing best practice, Better Place Australia is committed to understanding how coercive control is recognised and understood within its practice. In 2025, the Centre for Better Relationships (the research and advocacy arm of Better Place Australia) invited client-facing practitioners to complete a staff survey exploring coercive control. The findings of this survey will provide insights to inform the organisation's continued efforts to strengthen practice across its services.



About the survey

Practitioners across six service areas were invited to participate in an online survey. Invitations were limited to practitioners from services where coercive control is more likely to arise as a relevant issue in their day-to-day client work, particularly services involving family relationships, separation, or conflict. The survey asked practices about the types and impact of negative comments made by clients about their partner, the gendered differences in the use and impact of coercive control, and clients' self-identifying as victim/survivors of coercive control. A total of 32 practitioners completed the survey.



Types of negative comments made by clients towards their partner

Practitioners were asked how often their male and female clients made negative comments about their partners, using a 5-point Likert scale from Never to Always.

Figure 1 shows the average practitioner ratings. Male clients most commonly made negative comments about their female partner's **mental health** and least commonly about their **physical appearance**. Compared to female clients, they were more likely to make negative comments about their **partner's personal traits** (e.g. overall worth, appearance, mental health, intellect). Comparatively, female clients most commonly made comments about their male partner's **willingness to parent**, and least commonly about their **physical appearance**. Compared to male clients, they were more likely to make negative comments about their **partner's behaviour/skill** (e.g. willingness to parent, use of personal time, and ability to protect their children).

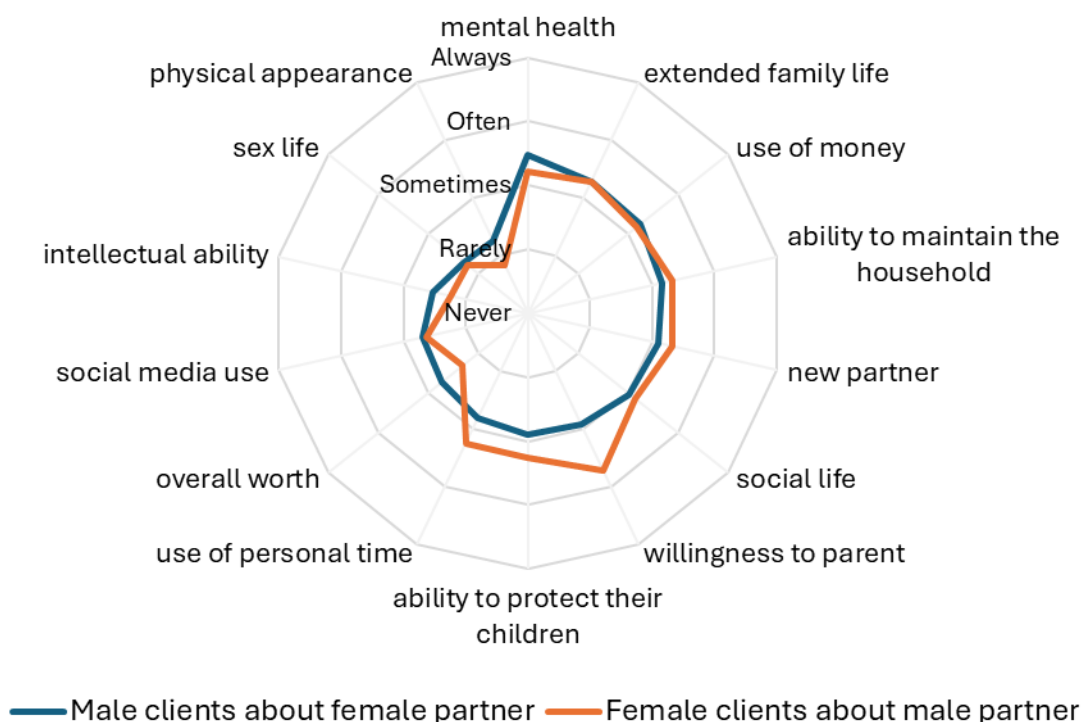


Figure 1: Average practitioner ratings about the frequency that male and female clients make negative comments about their partners



Impact of negative comments made by clients towards their partner

Practitioners were asked about the impact that persistent negative comments from a partner have on clients. Figure 2 shows that all respondents recognised that these comments have some level of impact on clients, demonstrating awareness that persistent negative comments can be harmful.

There was a perception that **female clients are more greatly impacted by negative comments than male clients**, with 63% of practitioners reporting women experience severe impacts compared to 16% for men. Male clients were more commonly reported to experience moderate impacts compared to female clients (75% vs 34%). This indicates that practitioners generally view a gendered difference relating to the impact that persistent negative comments have, with female clients experiencing more severe impacts.

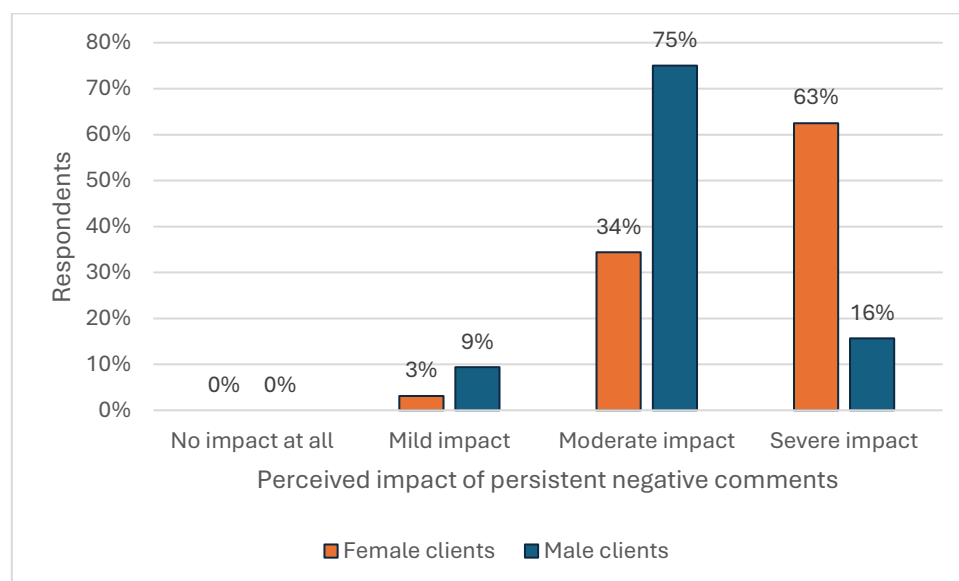


Figure 2: Perceived impact of persistent negative comments made by a partner



Gender differences in the use and impact of coercive control

Only 16% of practitioners agreed that men and women coerce other **adults** at the same **frequency**. This shows a clear perception that coercion between adults is more commonly associated with one gender over the other.

Perceptions around coercion involving **children** were more divided, with 44% agreeing that men and women coerce their children at the same **frequency**. Despite the closer split in opinions, the results suggest that one gender is often viewed as more likely to coerce their children.

Regarding the impact of coercion, there was mixed opinions about the impact of coercion. Just under half (47%) of practitioners agreed that coercion has the same impact on **adults** regardless of if it is done by a man or woman. Comparatively, opinions were less diverse with regard to children; 72% agreed that the impact was the same regardless of if it is done by the child's male or female parent.

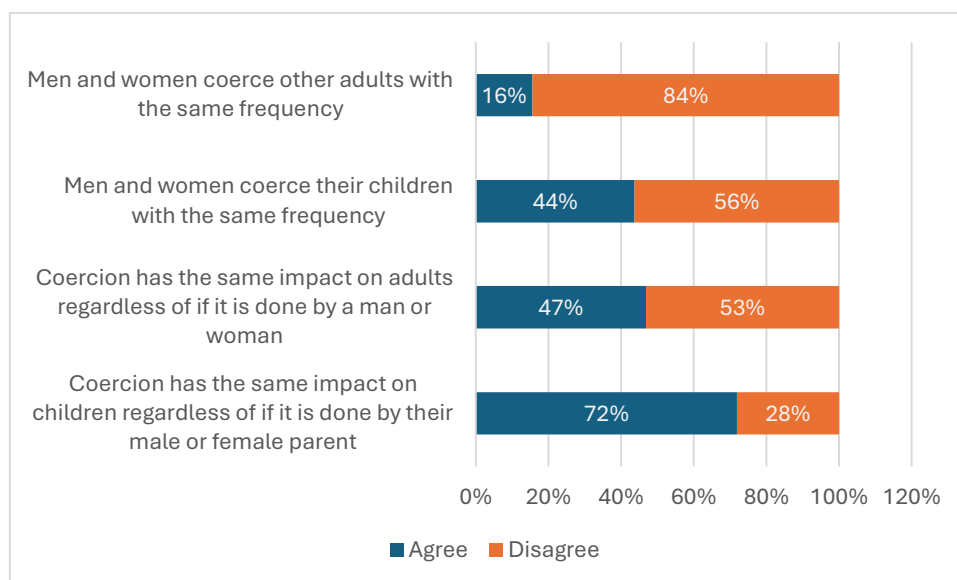


Figure 3: Practitioner agreement with statements on gender and coercion



Clients' self-identifying as victim/survivors of coercive control

Practitioners were asked how often their clients self-identify as victim/survivors of coercive control. Figure 1 shows that female clients were more likely to self-identify, with most practitioners reporting this occurred 'most of the time' (50%) or 'sometimes' (44%). In contrast, male clients were much less likely to self-identify, with 47% of practitioners indicating that male clients 'almost never' self-identified, while another 47% said it occurred 'sometimes'. This highlights **a clear gender gap, with female clients seen as more likely to self-identify as victim/survivors.**

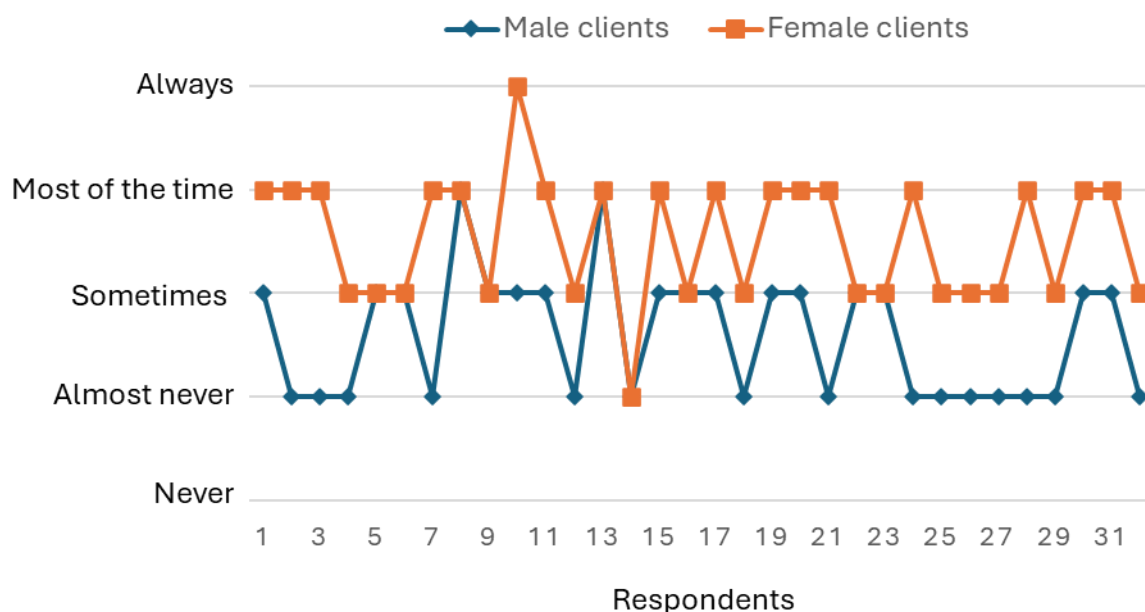


Figure 4: Respondents' perception of how often their clients self-report as victim/survivors of coercive control



Discussion and implications

The findings of this survey suggest that practitioners generally view coercive control through a gendered lens. It also suggests that it is common for female clients self-identify as victim/survivors of coercive control. Coercive control is a complex issue that can underpin all forms of intimate partner and family violence. The survey presented in this report had a narrow focus, examining coercion specifically through direct comments made by clients, particularly self-identification and negative comments made by clients. Negative comments can be a form of emotional or psychological abuse when repeated and targeted. In the context of Better Place Australia services, this may include putdowns, insults, accusations, or undermining the other parent's relationship with their child. If these comments are repeated and part of a pattern of behaviour aimed at controlling, intimidating, or degrading the other person, they can indicate coercive control. Understanding these behaviours within the context of our services is an important step in understanding coercive control. With this context in mind, the following paragraphs outline two areas where Better Place Australia could further deepen and enhance its understanding and practices.

First, perpetrators of coercive control may use a range of behaviours to exert power beyond verbal or psychological abuse. Examples of other coercive behaviours include threatening the person, stealing or damaging their property, monitoring their time and movements, stalking, or interfering with their relationships.⁴ A specific example mentioned in the National Principles is systems abuse in which the perpetrator misuses or manipulates services, systems and processes to exert power (including social services).¹ This could include multiple requests for mediation upon the other party. Given the nature of many of Better Place Australia's services, an ability to detect this type of coercive behaviour is essential to avoid unintentionally contributing to systems collusion, further exacerbating the impact of coercion on the victim/survivor. While the survey did not explore practitioners' perspectives of systems abuse or other forms of coercion, this highlights a key area for future training and review for policy and practice that should be explored.



A second area for reflection relates to the tactic in which perpetrators present themselves as victims, resulting in the true victim being misidentified as the perpetrator. Practitioners generally reported that male clients rarely or only sometimes self-identify as victim-survivors. However, there is growing attention to the deliberate use of victim narratives by perpetrators, a tactic most commonly discussed and understood within the context of the criminal justice system.^{5,6} Although the survey asked whether male clients self-identify as victim-survivors, it did not explore how practitioners interpret these narratives or assess the potential for coercion to be disguised this way. Consideration is needed as to how such dynamics may manifest within Better Place Australia services, and whether current practice is equipped to recognise and respond in an appropriate and trauma-informed way.

Conclusion

The findings in this report show that Better Place Australia practitioners commonly view coercive control through a gendered lens, and that it is relatively common for female clients to self-identify as victim/survivors of coercive control. Practitioner surveys such as this are a valuable tool for identifying strengths and opportunities for improvement. As part of Better Place Australia's ongoing commitment to reflect on and improve practice, the organisation will use these insights to reflect on how coercive control is recognised and understood in practice, and consider ways to continue building a shared, evidence-informed understanding across services.



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